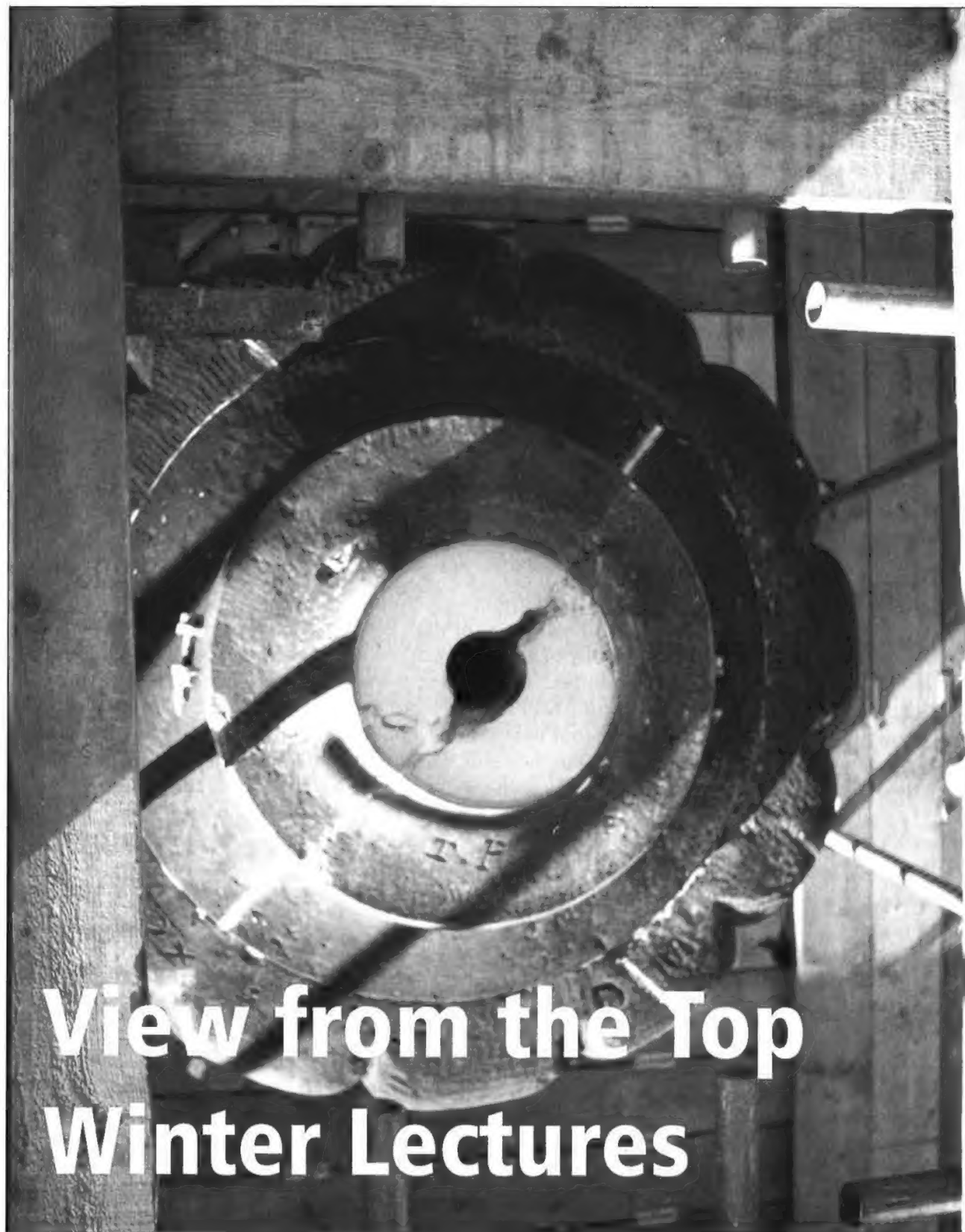


The Alexander Thomson Society Newsletter

N°30, January 2002



**View from the Top
Winter Lectures**

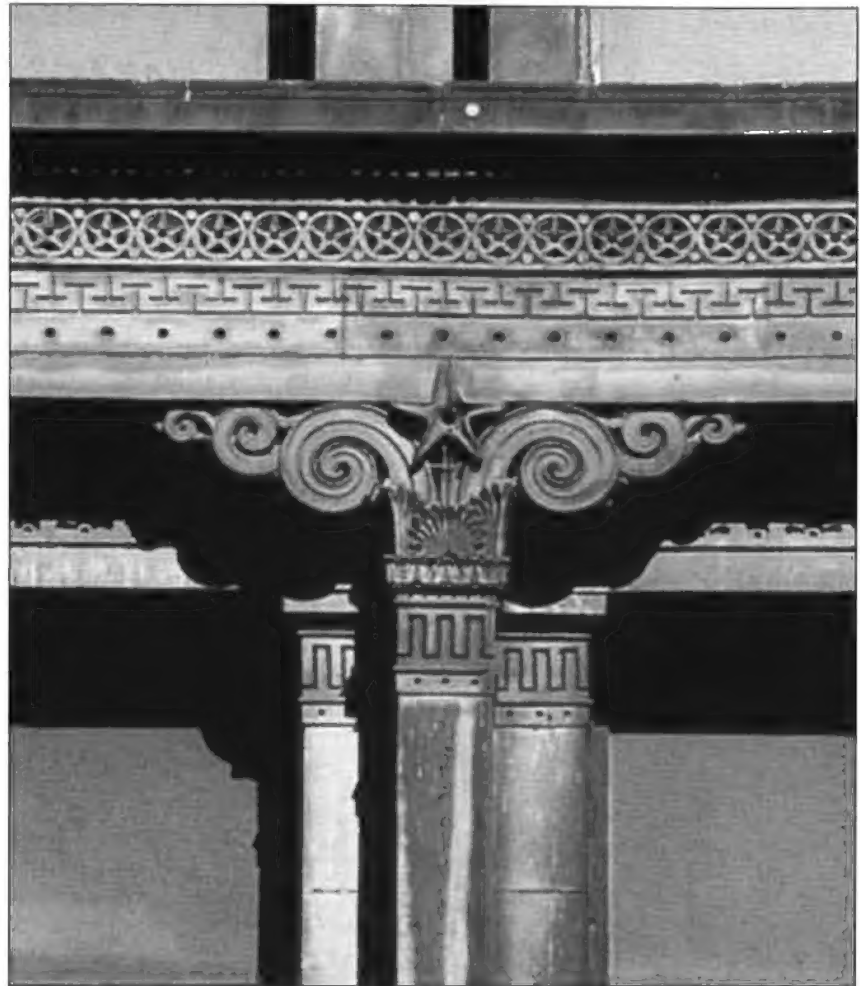
Cases

Egyptian Halls

IT REMAINS depressing and disturbing that no progress is being made towards repairing and using Thomson's finest commercial building.

In our last *Newsletter* we reported that we had asked Historic Scotland why they were offering a significantly lower grant to the repair scheme by the Morrison Partnership, architects, and Peter Stephen & Partners, engineers, than that earlier offered towards the implementation of much more destructive proposals. Historic Scotland declined to explain themselves to us, claiming to be "unable to divulge to a third party any information which has been provided in confidence to the Agency, or has been the subject of confidential discussions and correspondence" – even though the fate of Egyptian Halls is a matter of public concern and we are interested in sums of public money.

The Head of Grants wrote us on 18th July that "The architectural significance of Egyptian Halls is not in doubt but it is important that, as a public agency acting on behalf of Scottish Ministers and ultimately accountable to the Scottish Parliament, Historic Scotland takes a careful approach when appraising development proposals to ensure that the taxpayer is



Detail by Phil Sayer from 'Alexander Thomson: The Unknown Genius'

asked to contribute no more than is necessary for the viability of a commercial developer." Quite. So why was Historic Scotland prepared to offer four times as much public money to the owners of the ground floor shops just a few years ago?

The Morrison Partnership has since suggested that the size of the grant now offered – £250,000 – may have been based on a misunderstanding in that the submission to Historic Scotland was in two parts, with the first part concerned only with necessary works under the repairs notice, costing some £990,000. The total costs for the project, however, which involves many other works is very much higher, and includes items requested by Historic

Scotland such as replacing the six pavement lamps (which we would applaud). The Morrison Partnership has now reduced the cost of the proposed works by eliminating many items and Derek Souter of Union Street Properties has requested another meeting with the Architectural Section and the Grants Section of Historic Scotland to clarify matters, but Historic Scotland has declined to meet with him and his architects and engineers. Mr Souter now intends to appeal to the Commissioners to Historic Scotland.

In the present climate, with the political attitude towards conservation and historic buildings suggested by the Scottish Executive's proposal to abolish the Historic Buildings

Council for Scotland (leaving Historic Scotland unconstrained by any independent advice), we can only say that we find Historic Scotland's current policy towards one of the most important buildings of its sort in Britain (in Europe?) very worrying – especially as the approach taken towards the structure by both architects and engineers is exemplary in its thoughtfulness and proper conservatism.

Note: A 'For Sale' sign has now gone up on Egyptian Halls, while a new website, www.egyptianhalls.co.uk, invites potential partners for the development of a building that offers "unique retain, office and leisure opportunities."

Caledonia Road Church

THERE IS nothing positive to report. Indeed, contemplating the ruin of Thomson's first church, one might be forgiven for concluding that nothing really changes in Glasgow – or at least among those in positions of authority – despite all the platitudes spouted about tourism, conservation and the value of historic buildings. After all, it was in 1964 that the convenor of the planning committee of Glasgow Corporation told the RIBA that "the time may come when we have to consider

putting up a plaque instead of retaining certain buildings" and that Glasgow could not possibly retain both the St Vincent Street Church and the Caledonia Road Church; and in 1965 that the Corporation, which had bought the church, left the door unlocked so that an arsonist could do his worst. Since then several attempts have been made to achieve that "self-congratulatory act of demolition" predicted by Ian Nairn in 1967 or to move the ruin, and we are given to understand that it is still said in City Chambers that nobody cares about the church other than a few fanatics in the Alexander Thomson Society (and then we have – as reported in the last *Newsletter* – the brutish meanderings of Jimmy Boyle, who adds such lustre to the Scottish Arts Council by posturing as its chairman).

As we had heard rumoured, the plan by Tom Macartney of the Crown Street Regeneration Trust to have a competition to find a new use for the church in conjunction with developing the adjacent site has now been scuppered by the Strathclyde Transport Executive, which is using its statutory powers to decline to permit the removal of the redundant railway viaduct to the west of the Caledonia Road Church. This demolition is essential so that the traffic can be routed to the west to enable the restored ruin

to be given a new life by becoming accessible to and integrated with the new housing to the east. It is highly unlikely that rail traffic will ever need to use this stretch of line again – especially as the bridge which carried it over the main line to the south has long disappeared – and the Cumberland Street Station and the railway bridge over the Clyde to the north are accessible from the line over Eglinton Street; besides, Glasgow seems much more keen on smashing more motorways across the city than in reviving and extending the railway system.

Repairs have been carried out to stabilise the ruin for a decade or so, but the Caledonia Road Church remains in danger – thirty-five years after Henry-Russell Hitchcock gave it a lease of life by writing to the *Glasgow Herald* that "it is without question the most remarkable and the most distinguished ecclesiastical edifice of the high Victorian decades... It is hard to believe that the city of Glasgow is unable to find ways of preserving and re-using such a major document..." No: merely unwilling.

Watson Street

THERE IS cause for optimism over the redevelopment plans for Thomson's surviving, precari-



ous warehouse by Glasgow Cross, for which a scheme has been prepared by our own Mark Baines, architect, with Siroos Gholamy for the developers Alba Town.

Mark Baines reports that planning permission has now been obtained for the conversion and repair of Thomson's warehouse in Watson Street. The building is to be converted and in part rebuilt to accommodate twenty apartments above retail, business and studio space. Although a number of conditions have been attached to the permission, none are insurmountable and they relate mostly to aspects of the building's detail design. The next phase is to apply for

building warrant; this will involve consultations with structural engineers and acoustic consultants to resolve issues arising out of the retention of the existing cast-iron structure behind the stone facade.

West Regent Street / Wellington Street

COUNTY PROPERTIES, the company which owns the long-neglected building which Thomson enlarged and in which he had his office, and whose redevelopment proposals were the subject of a legal challenge under the European Convention of Human Rights, are now offering the property for sale. We

must hope that any new owner may decide to restore the existing fabric and that the postponed public inquiry into its fate – at which we were due to give evidence – may not now need to take place.

For Sale

SEYMOUR LODGE at Cove, the early Gothic villa by Baird & Thomson which became so influential and which spawned so many imitations owing to the publication of its (improved) design in *Villa and Cottage Architecture* (above), is currently up for sale. For details, contact Macdonalds on 0141 303 7100.

"A Protest against Gothic"

PROFESSOR David Walker has pointed out to me that, in my notes to Thomson's celebrated attack on the Gothic Revival in general and Gilbert Scott's designs for Glasgow University in particular which we reprinted in *The Light of Truth and Beauty*, I failed to mention that an abbreviated text of the lecture was also reproduced in *The Building News* for 25th May 1866.

The omission was certainly mine, and it is all the more annoying in that the extract, printed under the title of 'A Protest Against Gothic', elicited a mild protest from Thomson published in the issue for 8th June, on page 384. This is an interesting letter, for in it not only did Thomson clarify his attitude to the Gothic and distinguish between the Mediaeval and modern varieties, but he remained unrepentant over his attack on the fashion-following dons who commissioned a London architect. The following is the full text:

'SIR, — I beg to thank you for inserting in your number for 25th ult. some extracts from a paper read by me at the last meeting of the Glasgow Architectural Society. As there are some remarks in your introductory note calculated to give an erroneous impression as to the nature and aim of the paper, permit me to say that I did not intend that it should be either "a protest against Gothic," or "one sweeping condemnation of Gothic architecture." An unbiased

perusal of even the extracts given will show that I am not insensible to the merits of Gothic architecture. On the contrary, it has ever been to me a source of deep interest and delight. But I hold that it never reached the highest place amongst architectural styles, and that, from its nature, it never can — that the spirit and circumstances which produced it do not now exist; and I condemn as not only vain, but mischievous, all attempts to apply it to modern purposes.

Neither do I condemn "the professors of the university for not relying on Scotch genius in the matter" of their plans. After alluding to the importance of a city such as ours maintaining a local school of architecture, I say — "They (the professors) at least might have known that whatever honour a community may derive from the possession of great works of any kind, there is a much higher honour and a very manifest advantage in being possessed of minds that created

these works, and their first duty was to have used the means of ascertaining whether there were not some men amongst ourselves who deserved encouragement, and were capable of undertaking the erection of these buildings in a manner creditable to the institution. But if the half million of people by whom and for whom the university is chiefly maintained, and to whom they look for the means of carrying out their scheme, could not produce a man equal to the task, then the professors, as promoters of social progress and intellectual culture, were bound in duty to search for a properly qualified architect wherever he could be found, and offer him their work as an inducement to settle amongst us." — Yours truly,

A. THOMSON.

183, West George-street,
Glasgow,

6th June, 1866.'

MEMBERS OFFER

Murray Grigor's video 'Nineveh on the Clyde: The Architecture of Alexander 'Greek' Thomson' is available to Society members at a special price of £12, inclusive of postage and packing.

The 55-minute video includes additional footage not seen in its original television showing. The video is available in VHS (also NTSC format for US viewers).

Please make cheques payable to 'The Alexander Thomson Society' and order from 'Video Offer', 1 Moray Place, Strathbungo, Glasgow G41 2AQ

Thomson's Glen Eden

GLEN EDEN at Cove is the most extraordinary building attributed to Thomson. For a long time I could not believe that this eccentric villa, in which round-, pointed- and flat-headed windows all penetrate walls of rough stone, could possibly be by the architect of Holmwood and the Double Villa.

Now I am convinced that it certainly is by the master – as the low-pitched roofs, the general massing and the internal plan all suggest. I just wish I had concluded that sooner, so as to have included larger photographs of the house in the 1999 book.

The problem with all the villas at Cove and Kilcreggan is that there is no documentation or drawings surviving to establish authorship (as all the plots were feued from the Duke of Argyll there may well be evidence in the archives at Inveraray Castle, but this has not been made available to researchers). Fortunately, Thomson included his designs (slightly improved) for Seymour Lodge at Craig Ailey in the crucial Blackie book on *Villa and Cottage Architecture*, and the use of common details inside both Glen Eden and Craig Ailey (*a.k.a.* The Italian

Villa) irresistibly suggest the same hand.

In the 1999 book, having read his lectures and gained some insight into Thomson's intriguingly mystical and symbolic thinking, I speculated that the puzzling mixture of windows together with the peculiar Classical details might indicate "that the design might be an exploration of the origins of architecture". The curious main entrance, with a false arch formed by three massive stones, I suggested might reflect Thomson's growing obsession with the instability of the arch and might derive from a section of a tomb near the Pyramids of



Wednesdays at
7.00 p.m. in the
First Floor Lecture
Theatre of the
Bourdon Building,
Glasgow School of
Art, Renfrew Street

2002 Winter Lecture Series

- | | |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| January 30th | SAM MCKINSTRY: F.T. Pilkington: Thomson's only Scottish rival? |
| February 6th | ISI METZSTEIN: Thomson and Schinkel: a personal view |
| February 13th | GAVIN STAMP: Sir George Gilbert Scott - Thomson's Gothic adversary |
| February 20th | ANTHONY GERAGHTY: Charles Wilson |
| February 27th | SALLY RUSH: The Munich Glass Controversy at Glasgow Cathedral |



Glen Eden which James Fergusson included in his *Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* published in 1855. This, together with information gleaned from surviving records by Mrs Nan Moir, led me to suggest that Glen Eden dates from "c.1856 or earlier".

Now we can speculate further. Thanks to the kindness of Nan Moir, who has long loved Glen Eden and lived there with her husband John since 1968, two students from the Mackintosh School of Architecture, Johanne Muldoon and James Fairley, have made a thorough set of measured drawings of the villa over the last year. Several of these are reproduced here. In addition to preparing these drawings for their dissertation for their Diplomas in Architecture, Johanne Muldoon and James Fairley have analysed the plan of Glen Eden in terms of the development of Thomson's villa designs and have concluded that the house is

more likely to date from 1850-51.

This is certainly a more plausible date in terms of Thomson's stylistic development, as it seems to have been around 1851-54 that he ceased to be an eclectic and, as Hitchcock put it, "returned to the Greek" to create his own distinctive trabeated Neo-Classical style. There is no mention of the house in the 1851 Census but that does not mean the building was not standing then, and as it is such an exploratory and experimental design it does seem reasonable that it should pre-date Thomson's mature villas, like Rockland at Helensburgh and Tor House on Bute. The first date on any title deeds is 1852, but that may refer to the building plot rather than to a completed building.

The measured drawings expose one further curiosity about Glen Eden. On the south elevation facing the shore of the Firth of Clyde – which is

difficult to see head-on because of the luxuriant vegetation in the garden – both the four-bay ground floor bay window and the triple-arched window on the first floor are placed just off the centre line running up to the barge-boarded gable. Does this reflect another exploratory strand in Thomson's thinking, the influence of John Ruskin (whose ideas he criticised in the Haldane Lectures)? Much greater and more conspicuous asymmetries in contemporary Gothic Revival buildings often were a response to the 'Lamp of Life' in Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* published in 1849. Or does the slight symmetry merely suggest inadequate supervision of the work carried out by a local builder unfamiliar with such an unusual design, what with Thomson being far away in Glasgow and the regular steamboat service to the Rosneath peninsula only just beginning? Or is this merely a mistake in measuring? I don't think I can really accept the first explanation.

Glen Eden, A Villa by Alexander Thomson: A Measured Study by Johanne Muldoon and James Fairley, along with other dissertations on Thomson's architecture, can be consulted in the Glasgow School of Art library.

Grecian Chambers reopens

THE 2001 AGM took place at the end of November in the newly re-opened Centre for Contemporary Arts, refurbished and extended by Page and Park Architects.

After the meeting, David Page gave a guided tour of the public areas of the building, with vivid insights into the building's history and evolution. Page and Park's outline document shows the work that was undertaken.

Page and Park Architects won the design competition for the refurbishment of the CCA on the basis of a design philosophy of stripping back the years of crude additions to this city block to reveal the original core buildings.

From Scott Street to Charing Cross, Sauchiehall Street in the 1860s had a number of residential villas set in gardens along its north side. These villas were then either demolished or engulfed by new buildings as the city grew in size. The city block, occupied by the CCA was developed commercially.

The original villa was extended towards Scott Street and its basement extended, so that the house was elevated on columns. The garden was built on; with the most significant addition being the Grecian Chambers, designed by Alexander 'Greek' Thomson. This was built along the south edge of the site facing onto Sauchiehall Street.

This building was also extended with a brick-built warehouse on its west wing.



Over the years these buildings have been subdivided and added to, and linked with a series of badly constructed low-level roofs. The intention of the refurbishment proposals was to strip back the recent additions and reveal the core buildings, restoring them to their former glory.

Page and Park's proposals involved linking the core buildings by a series of independent bridges to provide a 'promenade' around the new Arts Centre. As at one time you could walk through the garden surrounding the residential villa, you can now walk around the 'cultural garden' surrounding the newly revealed villa. The stone villa, the rear elevation to the Grecian Chambers and the brick warehouse building now form the surrounding elevations to an enclosed courtyard with a high-level glazed roof. The circulation wraps around this

courtyard and the restaurant/cafe situated at the ground floor of this space. This is the main activity / orientation area, with the art spaces organised around this.

The bridges are a major feature of the new arts centre, with the structural steelwork being exposed and the balustrading creating an industrial aesthetic. The bridge to the rear of the site has a glazed walkway supported by a 'toblerone' truss structure; this allows the circulation route to be completed around the building.

The building is highly serviced, with Spaces 1 and 2 being air-conditioned to museum standard. Space 3 is fitted out as a performance space with retractable seating, stage lighting and tension wire access net. Space 5 is a cinema space. However, all the art spaces have the potential to be adapted to different art uses.

Leaving their mark



OUR COVER photograph of the summit of the elongated dome which rises above the St Vincent Street Church was taken last December from the scaffolding erected for stone repairs just before the replacement stone urn on top was hoisted into place.

These details can only have been seen up close on very few occasions since the steeple was originally completed in 1859. And what is visible, carved into the stone, are the initials of masons who must have completed the work in the winter of 1858-59. Who were they? We do not know: all we have are these proud, unauthorised but customary signatures on work well done.

The Glasgow these elevated men could see from the top of the wooden scaffolding was very different from what I could see on a brilliant cold day a century and a half later: open country to the north and west; a forest of masts marking the Clyde to the south; and, to the east, beyond the spire of the Cathedral, factory chimneys belching smoke. Except by pigeons, these unauthorised, proud inscriptions will not be seen again for many decades – we hope.

Another view which will not be seen again for some time is that of the complete south elevation and portico afforded by the current demolition of the shop in Bothwell Street with the absurd stepped piazza

on top attached to Heron House. See it while you can.

MEANWHILE, Gordon Urquhart of the Glasgow West Conservation Trust has kindly lent us a recently discovered photograph of the church (*overleaf*) taken the last time the southern portico was visible across the cleared site on Bothwell Street. It must have been taken in 1967 – the year the repairs to the fabric undertaken by Frank Mears & Partners were commenced and the year the contiguous tenement block by Thomson in St Vincent Street was demolished.

The St Vincent Street Church is illustrated and described as the only United Kingdom entry



in a new book published by Harry N. Abrams with the World Monuments Fund: *Vanishing Histories: 100 Endangered Sites from the World Monuments Watch* by Colin Amery with Brian Curran. Beautifully illustrated,

it is both a fascinating and depressing volume as it depicts what war, neglect, pollution and general human stupidity have done to some of the most interesting and culturally significant structures and places in the world.

'One of the Queen Ann folks'

THE SCOTTISH architect J.J. Stevenson (1831-1908) was an important social link between the artistic worlds of London and Glasgow. Thomson knew him and would call on him when in London. Born in Glasgow, Stevenson had worked in the office of George Gilbert Scott – of whose restoration practice he would become a severe critic – before setting up practice in Glasgow with Campbell Douglas. In 1869 he returned to London and became – along with another expatriate Scott, Norman Shaw – one of the advocates of the new eclectic manner of domestic design known as the “Queen Anne” Style. This was a reaction against the Gothic Revival which dismayed Sir Gilbert Scott towards the end of his life but was taken up by his brilliant architect son, George Gilbert Scott junior (1839-97).

In his letter to his brother George of 3rd June 1871 [published in this *Newsletter* No.11 in October 1994], Thomson described his encounter with these London aesthetes who

“seem to be adapting Japanese art to their Gothic things with great success. While others that were strong Goths a short time ago are now as zealous for what they call the Queen Ann style [sic]. I met young G.G.Scott at dinner at Stevenson’s he made his appearance in black knee breeks black silk stockings high heeled shoes with large buckles, blue coat, yellow vest white neck cloth with stiffener and frilled shirt — he is one of the Queen Ann folks.”



That Thomson was not exaggerating in his description of the dandified son of his old adversary over the design of Glasgow University is now confirmed by the discovery of a contemporary *carte-de-visite* photograph of the younger Scott and his wife in “Queen Anne” dress. Formerly in the possession of Scott’s granddaughter, it was taken by William Clarke, ‘Artist &

Photographer’ of Hampstead, in the early 1870s, presumably in the back garden of Scott’s house, 26 Church Row. He had moved there in 1872 following his marriage to Ellen King Sampson – who does not look very happy in the costume chosen by her husband.

The sequel is sad. In 1880, George Gilbert Scott junior shocked many friends and

Continued overleaf

Save almost 50% on 'The Light of Truth and Beauty'

ALEXANDER Thomson's public lectures, including his Haldane Lectures on art and architecture and his sensational attack on Gilbert Scott's Gothic design for Glasgow University, are here for the first time brought together here in a single volume. They reveal him as a powerful and eloquent speaker, and confirm that not only was he one of the most original architects of his time, but also that his was one of the greatest minds in Scottish architecture.

Published at £9.95 paperback and £16.95 hardback, as a member of The Alexander Thomson Society, you can save almost 50% on the retail cost of the book.

Members' Offer

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Hardback ~~£16.95~~ £11.00

The members' price includes postage and packing.

Simply send us your name and address with a cheque payable to 'Light of Truth Offer', The Alexander Thomson Society, 1 Moray Place, Strathbungo, Glasgow G41 2AQ.

Next Newsletter

The next *Newsletter* will appear in April 2002. It is intended to produce two editions of the *Newsletter* annually, with separate mailings as needed to notify members of events and meetings.

Church Architecture

THE EIGHTH edition of the *Building Conservation Directory* is a Special Report on Historic Churches: The Conservation of Repair of Ecclesiastical Buildings. And on the cover of this extremely interesting and most useful publication is a nocturnal photograph of the floodlit Caledonia Road Church, for inside is a forceful, well-informed and well-illustrated article by Jonathan Taylor on 'The Churches of Alexander 'Greek' Thomson'.

The author concludes, "Today it seems difficult to imagine how most people could have been so blind to the sheer quality of their architecture, their dramatic form and richness of detail as to allow their destruction. Yet even today, calls for the demolition

of these most important Victorian buildings can come from the most unlikely sources... conservation is still being led by a small number of avant-garde conservationists and historians, battling against ignorance and prejudice." True, alas.

Copies of this publication are available from Cathedral Communications Ltd, High Street, Tisbury, Wiltshire SP3 6HA: 01747 871717, bcd@cathcomm.demon.co.uk.

P.S. Jonathan Taylor's article illustrates in colour some images from Sandy Kinghorn's computer reconstruction of the interior of the Queen's Park Church which were such a sensation at the 1999 exhibition and which can be seen at www.cadking.co.uk.

'One of the Queen Ann folks'

Continued from previous page

members of his family by becoming a Roman Catholic. Four years later, after a dreadful public examination at Lincoln's Inn under the Lunacy Act, he was found to be of unsound mind. Scott's practice declined and he died – a physical wreck, estranged from his wife and children – in one of his father's most famous

buildings, the Midland Grand Hotel at St Pancras Station. All this and much more is described in my forthcoming book on George Gilbert Scott junior, *An Architect of Promise*, to be published next year by Shaun Tyas [Donington, Lincolnshire].

Gavin Stamp

The Newsletter

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